

DEMOCRACY

in the Middle East

DEFINING THE CHALLENGE

Contributors:

Joshua Muravchik

Laurie Mylroie

Graham Fuller

Martin Kramer

Mohammed Abdelbeki Hermassi

Edited by Yehudah Mirsky and Matt Abrens

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WHERE ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY PART WAYS

Martin Kramer

My purpose is to consider and critique the argument which has emerged as conventional wisdom about Islamic fundamentalism, and which has been echoed here in the presentation by Graham Fuller, that is that Islamic fundamentalist movements are, in reality, democracy movements and reform movements in disguise.

Graham did make the case, most eloquently, and perhaps a bit extravagantly, in the piece he wrote on Islamic fundamentalism for the *Washington Post* last year, when he called it "a movement that is historically inevitable and politically 'tamable.' Over the long run, it even represents ultimate political progress toward greater democracy and popular government."¹

Robin Wright has made a parallel argument, in which she declared Islam to be "at a juncture increasingly equated with the Protestant Reformation," thanks to the growing number of fundamentalists who "are now trying to reconcile moral and religious tenets with modern life, political competition and free markets."²

This representation of Islamic fundamentalism, which has gained widespread currency in academic and journalistic circles, is being driven simultaneously by two different rationales. The first is a variation of democracy theory, largely the

¹ Graham Fuller, "Islamic Fundamentalism: No Long-Term Threat," *Washington Post*, January 13, 1992.

² Robin Wright, "Islam, Democracy, and the West," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 71, No. 3, Summer 1992.

province of political scientists; the second is a tendency towards Islamic apologetics, which is evident among some Western students of Islam. I submit that their shared conclusion, that Islamic fundamentalism is really not fundamentalism at all but an earnest yearning for democracy and reform in Islamic guise, is driven more by disciplinary commitments and biases than by the evidence.

This variation of democracy theory, first of all, is committed to a thesis that the world is moving steadily and inexorably towards democratization in a universal and inevitable process. The Islamic Arab world is no exception. But there is a difficulty in the case of the Arab world because there are no obvious democracy movements, movements with which Western opinion would immediately sympathize, as there are in Eastern Europe.

Nonetheless, these are immensely popular and populist movements, Islamic in nature, and they demand free elections and the "rule of law." Since theory posits that democracy movements must be emerging here as elsewhere, and since the only movements that seem to be thriving are Islamic, logic strongly suggests that Islamic movements may well be democracy movements in disguise.

To be sure, much that they actually say and do is troubling. They talk about Islamic government rather than democracy; Bernard Lewis is right when he writes that fundamentalists do not use or even misuse the term "democracy" in their discourse.¹ And their notion of the "rule of law" refers to the unalterable law of Islam.

Nevertheless, the argument goes, this is a different cultural setting. If we cannot see the

¹ Bernard Lewis, "Islam and Liberal Democracy," *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1993.

democratic yearning beneath the surface, then perhaps it is a narrowness of our own vision and the result of our Western biases.

Some Western students of Islam are equally committed. They have invested immense energies in trying to bring about a Western understanding of Islam, an understanding that has always been sorely lacking. They are quite right that Islam, as a system of beliefs that comforts and inspires hundreds of millions of people, has not always gotten its due in the West, certainly not in the media. And one does find in the West, a lamentable tendency to associate the religion of Islam with terror and despotism.

These students of Islam find themselves in the awkward position of being asked about Islam only when someone is assassinated or something is blown up. They have been more than justified in reminding the world on these occasions that Islam is not Islamic fundamentalism.

But, recently, they have begun to realize that in many places, Islamic fundamentalism is becoming normative Islam. This is not the Islam that they had been defending. They had assumed that Islam was moving in another direction, towards Islamic modernism, the attempt to reconcile Islam with modern values.

In point of fact, Islamic modernism has been in eclipse for some time, yet the basic assumption of many scholars remains that the mainstream of Islamic thought must move, inevitably, again, towards some sort of enlightened reform. And if this is so, then the burgeoning fundamentalist movements cannot be what they seem to be, that is, an atavistic regression. Beneath their rough exterior, then, the work of reform must be underway. And if we cannot see this clearly, it is because of Western prejudice against Islam.

As you will have noted, a similar determinism has led both the democracy theorists and the students of Islam to their conclusions about Islamic fundamentalism. And these conclusions, I submit, are basically ideological. Not surprisingly, they fly straight in the face of an overwhelming amount of evidence, both of fundamentalist thought and practice.¹

Several salient issues need to be addressed. First, are the fundamentalists attempting to reconcile Islam with democracy? Are they indeed formulating their thought within the confines of the democratic discourse, as defined in the preceding presentations?

I see no evidence for this. Indeed, it seems that the principled position of every major fundamentalist thinker, the authors of the source texts that fundamentalists read, from Casablanca to Kabul, is that democracy is irrelevant to Islam and that Islam is superior to democracy. In this view, the fatal flaw of democracy is that it rests upon the sovereignty of the people. In Islam, God is sovereign, and his will is expressed in the *sharia*, the divinely revealed law of Islam. Democracy, which places the prerogative of legislation in the hands of the people, is the very essence of arbitrary government, because it turns on the whim of a shifting electorate, and electorates always shift, by their nature. No fundamentalist is prepared to submit to the will of that electorate, if it defies Islamic law. As Algeria's most outspoken fundamentalist put it, "One does not vote for God. One obeys him."

There are those in these movements today who allow that believers may participate in elections, envisioned as a kind of referendum of allegiance to a

¹ See Martin Kramer, "Islam vs. Democracy," *Commentary*, January 1993.

regime of divine justice, which would eventually bring Islam to power. But once established in power, the fundamentalists would be remiss in their Islamic obligation were they to let it slip from their hands. A nomocracy of Islamic law cannot envision its own disestablishment.

This does not mean that there can be no debate about the implementation of Islamic law where the law is vague, but there can be no debate over the primacy of the law itself, especially on points where it is not vague: the duties and punishments it imposes, and its principled inequalities between Muslims and non-Muslims, and men and women.

Nor can the debate take the freewheeling form often associated with democracy, with the formation of parties or individual campaigning. The fundamentalist revulsion against party conflict and personalities in democratic politics was best expressed by Dr. Hassan al-Turabi, himself armed with law degrees from the University of London and the Sorbonne, whose tract on the Islamic state argues that such a state has no need of party politics or political campaigns.

While Islamic law does not expressly forbid a multi-party system, he has written that "This is a form of factionalism that can be very oppressive of individual freedom and divisive of the community, and it is therefore antithetical to a Muslim's ultimate responsibility to God."

As for campaigning, he goes on to say that "In Islam, no one is entitled to conduct a campaign for themselves, directly or indirectly, in the manner of a Western electoral campaign. The presentation of candidates would be entrusted to a neutral institution that would explain to the people the options offered in policies and personalities."

I think we all recognize this formula of elections

without parties or candidates for what it is. It is a tacit justification of one-party rule, such as that over which Dr. Turabi currently presides in the Sudan.

But surely there must be significant differences among Islamic fundamentalists on these points? After all, note the doubters, the Arab Muslim world covers a vast expanse. There are many different movements which go by many different names. Perhaps it is possible to sort the moderates from the radicals and encourage the process of moderation in these movements.

Now it is, of course, quite obvious that circumstances do differ across the expanse of Islam. No two situations are identical. No two fundamentalist movements are identical. In the past, such movements often functioned in isolation. But the world is a changing place, and so is the Islamic world.

Just as modern technology has wired fundamentalism in this country (the televangelists come readily to mind), so it is now wiring Islamic fundamentalism. The jet, the fax, and the cassette have created global villages of Islamic fundamentalism. I say "villages" and not "village" because there are several of them. Perhaps the most important are that of the Muslim Brotherhood and that of the Islamic Republic of Iran. But each of these villages stretches from one end of the Muslim world to the other, and, at some crucial points, they even overlap.

In these villages, ideas and people move rapidly. Movements learn from, imitate, and often assist one another. The international Islamic *jihad* against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was one of their great achievements, a moral equivalent of the Spanish Civil War, which drew men and materiel from throughout Islam in a way that would have

been unthinkable only a decade before. And the phenomenon of Hezbollah in Lebanon cannot be understood without reference to its place in the closely-linked network that revolves around Iran.

Today these global villages are indeed global, extending even into the great cities of the West, as recent events have demonstrated quite vividly. In short, no Islamic fundamentalist movement can be regarded *sui generis*. No fundamentalist organization exists in a vacuum. In this interconnected world, there is no sealed laboratory in which a fundamentalist experiment can be conducted. Fundamentalism's fortunes in Algeria, for example, will affect the entirety of North Africa and much of the Middle East in ways that will be difficult to predict, but affect they will.

Maybe so, one might ask, but why should all this affect Western interests adversely? After all, states which have sold oil will continue to sell it. States which have needed aid, will continue to need it, even if they come under fundamentalist rule. Once in power, argues John Esposito, fundamentalists will "generally operate on the basis of national interests and demonstrate a flexibility that reflects acceptance of the realities of a globally interdependent world."¹ Once enmeshed in the world of real politics, the fundamentalists will have to accommodate it.

The argument has also been made, in the specific American context, that the Sunni fundamentalist movements did work with Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and even the U.S. in promoting the *jihād* against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. This is sometimes introduced as evidence that they are not anti-Western or are even prepared to work with the

¹ John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

West.

The argument, here again, seems to me very thin. Even in the promotion of the Afghan *jihād*, the fundamentalists never saw themselves as partners of the West in the Cold War. They realized that the West, for its own reasons, was prepared to arm them for their *jihād*, but, in their view, they were acting solely for the purpose of creating an Islamic Afghanistan. No doubt, were the U.S. prepared to sell them even more guns to create even more Islamic states, they would deal happily with it. But, ultimately, the idea would be to turn all these guns and states into the basis for Islam's emergence into great power status.

The fundamentalists do not speak in terms of a globally interdependent world. They now fantasize about a new world order very different from the one imagined in the West. In their vision, Islam will indeed sell its oil, provided Muslims would be allowed to invest the proceeds in instruments of war to enable them to reverse the course of modern history. This proliferation will eventually create a new world order based not on American hegemony but on a new balance of power between a reawakened Islam and the West.

As Hezbollah's mentor, Sayyid Fadlallah, has put it, "We may not have the actual power the U.S. has, but we had the power previously and we now have the foundations to develop that power in the future."

From the fundamentalist point of view, the restored balance between Islam and the West excludes the intrusive existence of Israel in the lands of Islam. Fundamentalists are uncompromisingly theological in their understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict. You no have doubt heard the Hamas covenant recited to you chapter and verse now, *ad*

nauseam. I would only suggest, though, that it be kept in mind that this happens to be a living covenant, unlike those of some other organizations.

In the fundamentalist view, Palestine is a land sacred to Islam; it is a land stolen by the Jews. Israel is a cancer in the Islamic world, planted by Western imperialism and nurtured by the United States. This is the general view held by all these movements, from the Shi'ite movements that receive guidance and support from Iran to the Sunni movements in the Muslim Brotherhood tradition.

Fundamentalist opposition to the American-sponsored Arab-Israeli peace process has been unequivocal and often violent, and I defy anyone to find a silver lining in the fundamentalist position.

In sum, the hopes placed on these fundamentalist movements by Western intellectuals have been misplaced in the way that so many Western intellectuals have misplaced their hopes before. Whether the rationale is democracy theory, apologetics for Islam or garden variety Third Worldism, the basic argument is the same: Ignore what the fundamentalists say to one another, ignore what they do to others. They must inevitably become what we need them to be. And the quicker we give in to them, the sooner that will happen.

Frankly, I confess I have moments when I wish this were true. However, the fundamentalists themselves have countered each of the arguments made on their behalf. I find them persuasive and they have raised more than reasonable doubt about the wisdom which has become so conventional this past year.

My purpose here has not been to prescribe specific policies for particular governments but to note some simple truths about Islamism. But the debate over what should be done has to be prefaced by a hard

40/ Democracy in the Middle East

look at what is and a return to the careful reading of the sources. If you wish, call this fundamentalism.